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AIDS

FACTS FOR LIFE

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**Answers to the
10 Most Frequently
Asked Questions
About AIDS**

Illinois Department of Public Health

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What is AIDS?

AIDS (Aquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) is a disease that causes the body to lose its natural protection against infection. A person with AIDS is more likely to become ill from infections and unusual types of pneumonia and cancer that healthy persons normally can fight off.

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What Causes AIDS?

AIDS is caused by a virus called HIV, or Human Immunodeficiency Virus, which attacks certain white blood cells that protect the body against illness.



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How does someone get HIV?

HIV is hard to get. However, both men and women can become infected with HIV and can give the virus to someone else. HIV is found in the blood, semen and vaginal secretions of infected persons and can be spread in the following ways:

- Having sex — vaginal, anal or oral — with an HIV infected person (male or female).
- Sharing drug needles or syringes with an HIV infected person to inject or “shoot” drugs.
- From an HIV infected woman to her baby during pregnancy or during birth. An infected mother can also pass HIV to her baby when breastfeeding.

HIV cannot be spread through:

Hugging. Shaking hands. Coughs or sneezes.
Eating food prepared or handled by an HIV infected person.
Donating blood. Mosquitoes. Toilet seats. Sweat or tears.
Simple kissing. Everyday contact with HIV infected persons at school, work, home or anywhere else.

What are the signs of HIV infection?

Some persons infected with HIV may feel healthy. Others may have symptoms that include: Unexplained tiredness. Swollen glands or lymph nodes. Dry cough or shortness of breath (not from a cold). Fever, chills or night sweats. Unexplained weight loss. Persistent diarrhea. Unusual spots on the skin or in the mouth. Remember, these symptoms are common in other illnesses as well. If these symptoms don't go away, you should see a doctor.

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How long does it take to develop signs of HIV?

Persons with HIV can develop signs of infection anywhere from months to years after being infected. About half of the people with HIV develop AIDS within 10 years, but the time between infection with HIV and the onset of AIDS can vary greatly.

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Can you tell if someone is infected with HIV?

No. Many persons with HIV do not show any sign of infection. However, being infected means HIV is in their body for the rest of their lives and they can infect others if they engage in behaviors that can transmit HIV.

7

What can I do to protect myself from HIV infection?

To avoid infection through sex, the only sure way to prevent the spread of HIV is not to have sexual intercourse or to have sex only with someone who is not infected and who only has sex with you. Using latex condoms properly every time you have vaginal, anal or oral sex, though not completely safe, can greatly lower your risk of infection. Don't do drugs. If you do, never share needles or syringes. Sharing needles or syringes to inject drugs or steroids, even once, can transmit HIV. HIV from an infected person can remain in a needle or syringe and then be injected directly into the bloodstream of the next person who uses it.

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Is there treatment for AIDS?

There is no cure for AIDS and once you have HIV you are infected for life. If you are infected with HIV, the virus slowly weakens your ability to fight illness. There are, however, treatments and medicines that can help your body resist the virus. They do this by slowing the growth of HIV and delaying or preventing certain life-threatening conditions.

Should I seek HIV counseling and testing?

If you have engaged in behavior that can transmit HIV, it is very important that you consider counseling and testing. The only way to tell if you have been infected with HIV is by taking an HIV-antibody blood test. This test should be done at a testing site, doctor's office or clinic familiar with the test. It is important that you discuss what the test may mean with a qualified health professional, *both before and after* the test is done. When the virus enters your body, your immune system responds by making proteins called antibodies. It takes time for the body to develop HIV antibodies after infection. Almost all persons develop HIV antibodies within 2 to 12 weeks, but it can take up to 6 months after infection. A positive result means antibodies to HIV were found in your blood. This means you have HIV infection. You are infected for life and can spread HIV to others. A positive test result does not mean you have AIDS. A negative result means that no HIV antibodies were found in your blood. This usually means you are not infected. However, if you engaged in behavior that can transmit the virus within the 6 months prior to the test, you may be infected but test negative because your body has not yet produced antibodies. To be sure, you should be retested. The HIV-antibody test should always include before-test and after-test counseling. This counseling is to help you understand the results, how to protect your own health and, if you are infected, how to keep from infecting other persons.

Where can I get more information on AIDS and HIV testing?

Talk with your doctor or local health department. You also can call the Illinois Department of Public Health toll-free AIDS Hotline at 1-800-AID-AIDS, (1-800-243-2437). TDD/TTY Information for the Hearing Impaired 1-800-782-0423.



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AIDS

FACTS FOR LIFE

- AIDS is a deadly disease caused by HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus).
- A person infected with HIV may have no symptoms but can still infect others.
- HIV is spread through sex with an infected person. Both men and women can spread HIV.
- To avoid HIV infection through sex, don't have sex, or have sex only with a partner who isn't infected and only has sex with you.
- Using condoms correctly every time you have sex reduces the risk of HIV infection.
- Infected women can pass HIV to their baby during pregnancy or when the baby is being born.
- HIV is spread by sharing needles.
- Donating blood is safe.
- HIV is not spread by hugs, handshakes or kisses.
- HIV is not spread by mosquitoes.
- There is no cure or vaccine for HIV.

The Illinois Department of Public Health funds counseling and testing sites throughout the state, where free, personal counseling is provided to answer questions and explain test results. For the location of a counseling and testing site or additional information about AIDS or HIV, call the Illinois AIDS Hotline at 1-800-AID-AIDS or 1-800-243-2437 or TDD/TTY 1-800-782-0423.